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Social Science Engagement and Political Interregnum in Nepal

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The Himalayan country of Nepal, long romanticized by anthropologists and other social scientists as an untouched 'Himalayan Paradise', embedded in sedentary bias, has been going through a tumultuous socio-political changes in the last few decades. Following the consolidation by Hindu King Prithivi Narayan Shah and his followers to cope with the unusual heterogeneity of the cultural and political traditions since 1976, Nepali State has gone through a series of significant socio-political transformations in the past 200 years. With the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990, the 10 year old Maoist people's war, expansion of Nepal's public sphere including media, wide spread migration communications and civil society, overthrowing of monarchy and declaring of Nepal as a republic as well as a secular state, emergence and consolidation of identity politics and the debate on state restructuring and federalism, Nepal is going through a major political transition. More recently, Nepal's Constituent Assembly was dissolved on 27 May 2012 because an agreement could not be reached on the nature of the federal structure due to stark disagreements on the nature of the federal structure between the Maoists and identity groups on the one hand and rest of the political parties on the other hand.

There is very little constructive academic debate on the current socio-political transition in Nepal except for a few journalistic commentary and reports supported by donors that either paint the picture of Nepal as a failing or failed state or romanticize the revival of ethnic and regional politics as a process of democratization. This paper takes an issue with social scientists for failing to engage with contentious issues such as federalism debate instead leaving it to contrasting populist discourses. It is not my primary purpose to evaluate the historical or ethnographic evidence on some of the most contentious issues including the diagnosis of state-society relations in Nepal and offer prescriptions, for which there are plenty of activists, pundits, donors and consultants in Kathmandu, but to critique this particular epistemic assemblage for failing to comprehend some of the basic questions facing Nepali society. How should social scientists engage on issues such as ethnicity and state structure? What is the role of anthropologists and historians when the knowledge that they produce is used for the purpose of making claims on ethnic federalism? Should the social scientists accept the fixed ethnic categories used by the activists, state and aid donors, or should they adopt a more critical perspective on the social construction of identities and fluidity of boundaries, and the role of academics, activists, analysts, donors and short-term consultants, who sustain such a representation? I argue that the current political impasse in Nepal is worrying, not because Nepal is turning into a failed state as some Western scholars and

media have often claimed including a recent piece in the New York Times¹, but because of the academic silence of social scientists working in Nepal who fail to acknowledge the fluid boundaries of ethnicity as well as changing nature of Nepali society but are instead caught in the timeless and sedentary imagination of Nepal. If the current political impasse ought to break, we will need a rigorous and informed public debate on how has the Nepali state and society been changing over the last 200 plus years.

Nepali State

In the post-1990 era, anthropologists and other social scientists, both 'foreign' and 'Nepali', have studied state-society relations and highlighted the ethnic dimension of the Nepali state. The most authoritative criticism focused on the exclusionary nature of the Nepali state, dominated by what some social scientists have categorized 'Parbatiyas' i.e. member of the hill caste groups that has always been Nepali speaking (Gellner et al., 1997, Lawoti, 2005). Starting with King Prithvi Narayan Shah, the Nepali state has defined itself against external threats, especially the rising British Empire, while trying to be a pure Hindu land at home. Prior to 1769, Nepal was divided into many autonomous petty states. Prithvi Narayan Shah and his successors started integrating Nepal into a single nation with an ambition to establish "asal Hindustan" or true Hindu land (Whelpton, 2005). Although the dominant Nepali nationalists continue to feel proud of the moves of King P. N. Shah and his successors towards creating a greater Nepal and strategically resisting the external threat, his critics see his aim to create "asal Hindusthan" as a way of marginalising the non-Hindu caste groups (Gurung, 1997, Whelpton, 2005).

Nepal came under the Rana regime for 104 years (1846-1950) through a coup called *kot parba* (courtyard massacre). In the Rana period Nepal allowed itself to be the semi-colony of British Empire (Blaikie et al., 2001). The Ranas got exposure to western ideas and institutions through contact with the British Empire. One of the outcomes was the *Muluki Ain* (National Code), which was enforced in 1854 legitimizing the caste system, gender hierarchy and superiority of the Hindu religion (Whelpton, 2005). Although the concept of the code is said to be inspired by western ideas following the visit of Rana Prime Minister Jung Bahadur to Europe, the content was largely functional to the interests of dominant elites that were important for supporting the regime. Overall, the pre-1951 rulers put Nepal under a Hindu ritual framework. Pfaff-Czarnecka (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1997: 425) offers the following analysis:

"From the point of view of rulers, the plurality of Nepali society was conceived of within the uniform socio-political framework. Rather than seeking to establish national unity through a vision of a culturally homogenous population, the rulers sought to define a national identity which allowed for cultural variation but which had Hinduism as its major pillar "

When India became independent from British rule, and the Rana regime

¹ See an op-ed by Seyom Brown and Vanda Felbab-Brown titled 'Nepal, on the Brink of Collapse', 5 June 2012. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/06/opinion/nepal-on-the-brink-of-collapse.html>

subsequently ended, the Shah rulers attempted to promote one nation sharing a common culture in the post-1951 era. Their major strategies were: equality of citizens under the law (although the caste system was not explicitly abolished), a modern administrative system, elections, welcoming of foreign aid and a project of modern development aimed at turning former subjects into citizens. In its effort to promote nationalism based on cultural unity, the government mobilized the concept of development (*bikas*): physical infrastructure such as road and air transport, radio, education system and administrative system privileging Nepali language among others.

More recently, in the post 1990 era, Nepal is experiencing a surge in identity politics leading up to demands for ethnic federalism that challenges the unitary image of Nepal. The new constitution in 1990 enabled the formation and mobilization of organizations representing regional, caste, linguistic and ethnic identities. The significant political events since 1990, coupled with the growth and proliferation of different media, civil society, Maoist insurgency and ethnic and non- governmental organizations have transformed the character of Nepal's public sphere (Onta, 2002). Whereas the government during the Panchayat era monopolized radio Nepal, there was a media boom in the years after 1990, as newspapers and FM stations multiplied, offering different perspectives from across the political spectrum (Onta, 2002).

Following 10 years of the Maoist insurgency as well as the coup by King Gyanendra, the Maoists and the alliance of seven democratic parties forced King to give up power and a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2006. Reflecting the sentiments of ethnic minorities and those who fought against the Hindu monarchy, the new government declared Nepal a secular state. Despite much controversy and postponement, Constituent Assembly (CA) elections were held in April 2008 that elected one of the most diverse and inclusive parliaments in Nepal's history. An interesting outcome of the elections was the emergence of regional identity based parties that represent the grievances and aspirations of the people of the Tarai (lowlands bordering India). Immediately after the elections, on 28 May 2008, the new parliament declared Nepal a "federal democratic republic." Nepal's CA parliament was tasked to write a new constitution by 28 May 2010, which had been extended until 27 May 2012, representing the perceived grievances and wishes of one of the world's most diverse and complex societies. As indicated earlier, Nepal's Constituent Assembly was dissolved dramatically on 27 May 2012 following stark differences between those supporting ethnicity-based federalism versus those who did not support such a state structure.

There is now an imagined idea of 'new Nepal' (or Naya Nepal) based on plural notions of existence of ethnicities based on different region, language, religion and cultures. The efforts to a more plural notion of the Nepali nation received a significant push as the Maoists together with various ethnic groups put issues of ethnic state structure in the centre of the political and constitutional debate. With the declaration of Nepal as a secular state and monarchy abolished, the ongoing political movements focus on changing the rules of the game through federalism, affirmative action and other provisions to promote equal

representation of the citizens in the state structure.

Social Change

Apart from these significant socio-political developments, there is clear evidence of a qualitative 'step-change' in the way Nepali society is organized that is beyond the "normal" processes of incremental change that are always at work.

Based on a field research since 2007 (Sharma and Donini, 2010, Sharma and Donini, 2012), we found many existing social norms and patterns are being challenged and many are being reconstructed. Two most important forms of visible transformations in rural Nepal include: 'increased awareness and education' and 'increased collective agency of discriminated groups'. Dalits and women we spoke to repeatedly emphasized that 'they had become aware' and their 'sense of confidence and self-esteem had increased considerably'. Perhaps the most important 'step-change' is seen in the caste domain where there has been significant reduction in discriminatory practices, more evident in the public than in the private sphere and the increased agency of Dalits. Women's collective agency has equally increased. Symbolic change has affected relations among groups in the public sphere (caste, gender and other forms of discrimination, social rituals etc.), less so in the private sphere.

Alongside the politicisation of ethnicity at the centre, there is a sense that local people are increasingly aware of their ethnic identity although local people did not speak directly about affirmation of ethnic identity as a form of social transformation. Despite the heated scholarly and popular debate on ethnic federal structure, affirmative action, ethnicity based political mobilisations and ongoing politics of identity in the centre among the activists and pundits and donor agencies, people we spoke to at the local level did not view this issue as a form of social transformation. However, we do maintain that this is likely to change in the next few years with the mass politicisation of ethnicity associated with growth and expansion of organisations and networks.

Labor relations in rural Nepal have undergone major changes in recent decades accompanied by livelihood diversification and multi-locale livelihoods in Nepal. Not only has rural to urban migration emerged as an important part of livelihoods, rural laboring households are drawing income both from wage labor in agriculture and other wage labor opportunities that have emerged locally. Bonded or attached forms of patron-client caste based relations have significantly weakened. Although traditional forms of semi-feudal labor relations have not disappeared completely and some poorer households are still engaged in semi-feudal and caste-based labor arrangements in agriculture, there is clear evidence of increasing numbers of laboring households involved in wage labor within or outside of the village. Many are commuting to work in construction and informal sectors in nearby villages or roadside markets and cities. The changes in rural labor is evident in the following ways: a) diversification of rural livelihoods from land and agriculture-based to non-agricultural and non-land based; b) gradual weakening of traditional systems of labor arrangements including caste-based division of labor; c) commodified labor; and d) widespread mobility of labor both within and outside of the country. Overall, these changes

indicate a clear *shift* in the social and economic position of the laboring population from *subjects* to *citizens*. Such change has increased economic and political agency of the laborers and laboring households but is not free from vulnerabilities and risks. Despite the weakening of semi-feudal labor relations, laboring households have not been able to enhance their economic status on a significant or a sustainable basis. Compared to the past, wages have increased and laboring households have access to cash, but income is not enough to meet subsistence needs as the sources of expenses have also increased and so has their dependence on the market. Even if migrant remittances and livelihood diversification had enabled some households to improve their socio-economic position in the community, the conditions of structural violence affecting the majority of the rural poor do not seem to have changed substantially. Nonetheless, it is important that these changes are acknowledged and their implications discussed.

So far, however, it would seem that structural underdevelopment and attendant economic relations have not changed – something that has not attracted the attention of anthropologists or other social scientists who are pre-occupied with Nepal's sedentary and timeless imagination or who have more recently jumped on to the ethnic grievances bandwagon. The concept of interregnum, where the old is dead whereas the new is not yet born, appropriately highlights the current transition in Nepal and the confusion it generates in the minds of social scientists.

Donor complicity

In the context of Nepal's struggle for peace, democracy and stability and 'democractization' following the ten-year old bloody Maoist insurgency, sentiments relating to ethnicity and exclusionary nature of Nepali state have not only been only picked up by academic-activists, consultants and political pundits, but also by international donors and their NGO counterparts who are a part of the same epistemic community as many if not all are dependant on funding from aid agencies to support their research and thus their livelihoods through short-term consulting assignments. The criticism against the complicit academics is not just because many promote donor interest through their research, but more importantly because they fail to critically engage on the most critical questions. For these reasons, Nepal's case offers an excellent opportunity to interrogate and critique the political use of social science knowledge by agents of change such as powerful European donors in Kathmandu. So much so that Nepal ought to be a case study for investigating how social science can do, as much as what it fails to do.

Let us consider a brief account of a DFID supported Janjati Empowerment Programme (JEP) in Nepal that met with resistance and counter-resistance, leading to the some stark criticisms of DFID's engagement in Nepal eventually leading to its withdrawal of support for JEP. On 11 May 2011, DFID announced that it would no longer continue its financial support to NEFIN (National Federation of Indigenous Nationalities), and withdrew a support of NRs 110 million from the Janajati Empowerment Project II (JEP II) citing violation of the terms of funding between DFID and NEFIN, because the latter had been

continuously involved in organizing 'bandas' (shutdowns). Since September 2004, DFID had provided over £ 2 million to NEFIN for different projects. The Head of DFID-Nepal wrote to NEFIN President stating ".... due to NEFIN's recent continued involvement in supporting the 27 April 'banda' and based on information verified with you that NEFIN is part of a wider front to call a 'banda' on May 13 (Friday) to protest for constitutional rights of Janajati and wider people from the marginalized communities, I am sorry to inform you that DFID will not be able to provide any further funding as a result." The letter further mentioned, "...we cannot continue our support to organization that is organizing 'banda', which is totally against Human Rights."

This particular incident helps situate complexities involved in donor support in the current context in Nepal. Responding to the criticisms that aid agencies have historically benefited the dominant elite and helped sustain the hegemony of the high castes rather than challenging it, several aid agencies began to launch programmes targeting Dalits and ethnic groups from the early 2000s. The most controversial among them has been DFID's funding to NEFIN not only because of the incident explained above but also because there is a strong narrative, especially among the high-caste elite, that donors are undermining the unitary nature of Nepali State and are considered responsible for radicalizing ethnicity, creating divisions and fuelling hatred in Nepal.

Criticisms of donor engagement on social engineering such as that of DFID have met with nationalist and sovereignty based sentiments that are reflected in the media reporting as well as perception and everyday resistance of Nepali bureaucracy that sees DFID's engagement as promoting ethnic divisions in Nepali society as well as instability. The recent visit of the UK Minister for International Development in July 2012 was met with some stiff questioning by journalists on DFID's role in stirring ethnic conflict in Nepal.

One of the key criticisms is associated with donors' engagement on the issue of ethnicity and ethnic categories in their attempt to promote inclusion, equality and democracy. The work of donors who began to support more inclusive development by funding targeted programmes ethnic groups has come under criticisms from certain groups who argue that aid agencies have helped re-affirm the ethnic identity by essentialising categories. Rather than 'class' or 'economic inequalities', donors are blamed for their exclusive focus on ethnicity, and therefore making a serious 'mistake'.

A few critics see the declaration of Nepal as a secular state and a federal democratic republic in 2008 as the work of donor agencies. They argue that as the monarchy represented the protector and symbol of the dominant social and religious order, for those interested in the transformation of Nepali society, it was an obvious move to dismantle the institution that was seen as a major obstacle (Shah, 2008). Citing the activities of evangelical lobbyists and western embassies based in Kathmandu at the time of declaration of Nepal as secular state, Shah (2008: 17) writes, 'Although, the formal rationale has been to separate the state from Hindu religion, the unstated consideration has been to

weaken the king by removing the symbolic ties between the Hindu crown and the state.'

Conclusion

Apart from the populist commentary and activist slogans, there has been very little serious academic debate on most significant issues such as ethnicity and state restructuring in Nepal. Social scientists with academic authority on the subject are largely silent and the debate in the public sphere is largely one sided pushed by activists and donor supported political pundits. Silence on the part of the social scientists ought to be a matter of concern especially in a context where sociological, historical as well as anthropological knowledge appears to be critical in shaping the political debate on state restructuring. While it is not desirable for social scientists to engage as activists, academic silence should be unacceptable. For instance, it must be clear to the scholars of Nepal that the nature of structural violence and inequality in Nepal is not all about 'ethnicity' and it cannot be dealt within the framework of proposed model of ethnic federalism. There is no denying of the fact that Nepali state did systematically marginalize some ethnic groups and promoted others. But, to call 'ethnic federalism' a solution to the historical mistakes makes very little sense, not only because it fails to understand the nature of social exclusion and structural violence in Nepal, but also because it has a real potential to promote political instability and ethnic conflict in the country. The nature of structural violence in Nepal is complex; while ethnicity is one and a major dimension to it, it is not the only one. In fact, it is the livelihoods where structural violence is most violent; and marginalized populations within the ethnic groups ought to get attention than a particular ethnic category.

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